Professor Eszter Spät Interview Transcript

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Eszter Spät is a visiting professor in the Cultural Heritage Studies Program at the Central European University. Her research focuses on Yazidi religious history, particularly on the origins and development of Yazidi oral history and identity. For more information about Professor Spät's work, click here.

Seth: What are the main aspects of how God is perceived in Yazidi religion and culture that you have found in your research?

Professor Spät: There are many aspects [about how Yazidism perceives God]... Regarding [more] philosophical precepts, [such as] a well-articulated understanding of God, [this is] where I would be careful. Kreyenbroek,[1] I suppose you have read him, has written about this extensively. You need a different approach when you're talking about an oral tradition [rather] than a literate one. Of course, even with a literate one, if you just walked up to somebody who is not very educated and started asking these questions from a Christian or a Muslim, I'm not sure they would be able to answer them. It took centuries to develop philosophy and theology, and it happened within the framework of literate traditions.

I don't know if you have read Jack Goody. He writes a lot. He's an anthropologist who really went into the question of how literacy changed our way of thinking and how it changed culture. I know that not everybody agrees with him and I don't agree with everything he says. Our field is always changing and evolving, but he has a point that if you have written [information], then you can carry on the dialogue throughout space and time, so people living in different eras and different geographical places can dispute with each other's thoughts, and so on. This cannot happen in an oral tradition.

If you look at how Christianity was built up, through centuries of Church Fathers[2] refining everything, what they understood by God, what they understood by the Trinity, and so on. That took a long time and it also took people who were very highly literate. When you have an oral tradition, these discussions do not really happen. I think that average Yazidis don't even ask this kind of question. God exists, yes, but they don't go around trying to define him. Being a Yazidi is much more about the way you live.

[1] Philip Kreyenbroek is Professor Emeritus of Iranian Studies at the University of Göttingen. His 1995 book *Yezidism: Its Background, Observances and Textual Tradition* revolutionized the field of Yazidi studies.
[2] The term "Church Fathers" refers to the ancient Christian theologians, such as Augustine of Hippo, Jerome of Stridon, and John Chrysostom, who laid the foundations of Christian intellectual and religious doctrine.

Actually, it's not [only] Yazidis, but if you look at the Zaza-Alevis[3] in Turkey, there are a lot of similarities. Zaza-Alevis are not totally oral, but dominantly oral. They call their religion *Rêya Heqî*, "the True Road." You could, in a way, apply this to the Yazidis as well, but they're not that concerned with the past. Of course, they now have this young, educated generation who are looking at Christian, Muslim, and Jewish writings, and many of them grew up in Europe or [received a] Western education. They're now trying to articulate Yazidi [identity] in this way, which they see in school and around themselves, trying to create a coherent theological system, philosophy, and so on.

Traditionally, being a Yazidi was much more about a framework of how to live and the observance of certain social rules, rituals, and obligations. This included reverence for holy beings, but without really going around and trying to define them. For example, there is this expression, *Hass*, which [has] a deep "Ha" sound that I cannot pronounce. You can see it in Professor Kreyenbroek's book, and if you ask people [about] what *Hass* is, you're going to get very different answers, depending on the educational background of the person.

If you look at Yazidi sacred hymns and speak with some of the older, more traditional people, you pretty much get the impression that *Hass* were, most of the time, incarnated divine [beings].[4] If you ask someone who is younger or has a more Western-style education, they're going to say that *Hass* were just normal humans who received miraculous power from God. [According to younger people, these figures were] more like saints in Christianity or *Awliyaa'* [saints, literally "friends/allies of God"] in a Muslim context, but this is not true [according to Yazidi tradition].

If you look at the old texts, *Hass* are usually more than [humans gaining divine powers], but it's also true that *Hass* have their own hierarchy. There are the ones who were basically the incarnations of the Seven Great Angels, and then there are more local, more obscure figures. There is no traditional definition of *Hass*. Any definition that exists is emerging now because these kinds of [philosophical, theological] questions were not asked [by Yazidis] in the past.

Seth: In terms of the relationship between God, Tawusi Melek, and manifestations of the Divine such as Sheikh Adi, Sultan Ezi, and the Seven Angels,[5] how do these dynamics work in Yazidism? Are these figures emanations of God? Or, do interpretations of the relationship between these figures depend on who you ask?

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[3] The Zaza-Alevis are an ethnoreligious group who speak the Western Iranian Zaza language and largely reside in eastern Turkey. Zaza-Alevis adhere to Alevism, a form of Islam that differs from both Sunnism and Shiism.

[4] According to Yazidi tradition, holy beings such as the Seven Angels took human forms as revered holy men, spiritual leaders, and prophets. These incarnated divine beings walked among the Yazidi people and the rest of humanity, dispensing wisdom and religious knowledge.

[5] The Seven Angels were created by God to to manage His affairs on Earth and interact with humanity. Tawusi Melek, also known as the Peacock Angel, is the leader of God's Seven Angels and is a manifestation of the Divine. Veneration for Tawusi Melek is at the center of the Yazidi religion. Sheikh Adi and Sultan Ezi are holy beings in Yazidism. Historians generally agree that Sheikh Adi emerged from the historical figure Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir, a 12th-century Sufi mystic who settled in northern Iraq. Sultan Ezi's origins remain debated.

Professor Spät: Of course, you always have to interpret sacred texts. With regard to Tawusi Melek, we would use the word "emanation," which is already from our own [Western] cultural background. If you look at the Gnostic tradition,[6] you could [apply the term] "avatar" [to the relationship between God and other holy beings in Yazidism], which is more of a Hindu concept, I think. So, there is always this phenomenon of having to translate the terminology of one religious and cultural tradition into the language of another tradition, but this cannot be helped.

[In Yazidism], I think that there is an agreement that in the beginning, God created Seven Angels from his own *nûr*, light, or *sirr*, which comes from the word "mystery" in Sufi[7] terminology, but Yazidis use it more in the sense of "divine essence."

If we want to translate these terms into a language that we can understand, then I think [that the Seven Angels] are emanations [of God]; they are angels of the Godhead.[8] Once the world is created in Yazidi mythology, they play a much more active role [in it] than God. You get this God-figure that withdraws from the world after creation, and it's more his angels who happen to be active. According to traditional Yazidi mythology, these angels appear on Earth. With regard to how you interpret this today, that depends on who you are.

For some people, it's clear that God, Tawusi Melek, and Sheikh Adi are one [being], or sometimes, God's dynasty and Sheikh Adi are one. It's pretty simplified. If you speak with more [Western-style] educated people today, they would say, "Well, it's not an incarnation, it's more like [God is] sending [his] power [to holy beings]."

[According to Yazidi tradition], Tawusi Melek, the Peacock Angel, became incarnated in Sheikh Adi. For less traditional people, it's more like Tawusi Melek gave *keramet* [miraculous or spiritual power] to Sheikh Adi, but Sheikh Adi himself was a human. The same is true for other incarnated angels. It's hard to know how this idea was imagined 100 or 200 years ago, because when [Western] missionaries and travelers went among [the Yazidis], they asked religious questions in ways that made sense to them. [They asked religious questions in a way that] people who grew up on Christian catechisms [asked those questions]. They didn't spend enough time observing, listening, and hearing how people talked, which makes you able to better understand concepts that are very hard to express in the ways that we [in the West] express our ideas about the supernatural world.

Seth: How do Yazidis perceive their own history? What mythological or religious narratives are central to their historical understanding?

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[6] Gnosticism refers to multiple religious movements that emerged from strands of Judaism and early Christianity during the first and second centuries CE. These movements emphasized the acquisition of hidden, esoteric, and personal religious knowledge over orthodox forms of religious authority, among other practices.
[7] Sufism is a form of Islamic mysticism that focuses on achieving direct experience of God through prayer, meditation, fasting, and performing rituals and celebrations at shrines, among other practices.
[8] In the discipline of Religious Studies, the term "Godhead" refers to God's essence, substance, or state of being.

Professor Spät: I think in this case, you cannot quite separate mythology and history, which is true whether you look at Greek [mythology] or the Bible. Even with the Bible, [like the] Old Testament, it's a big question, what is myth and what is history? Archaeologists and [other scholars] are still working on that. It's the same [question] with the Yazidis. The creation myth is part of their history. The appearance of incarnated angels, whether [in the form of] Sheikh Adi or other figures, is part of their history. All of these happenings are directly connected with Yazidis.

Traditional Yazidi mythology and history don't talk about events other than [the Yazidi people's] background. For more recent events, obviously, there is a lot of periscoping, because, in the case of oral tradition, human memory cannot retain everything. You will get the old histories in which there is a lot of divine, supernatural intervention. Then, you will get more recent histories, which, when they refer to concrete events, go back to the mid-19th century with the attacks of Bedir Khan Beg and Muhammad Pasha of Rawanduz on the Yazidis.[9] In between [these two types of histories], you have historical events that are interwoven with mythical figures.

For example, you can read a myth about Yazid ibn Mu'awiya, who was a [Muslim] historical figure [from the 7th century CE]. It is all placed in a [later] Ottoman context because it talks about Constantinople and the Sultan in Constantinople. Of course, at the same time, a lot of figures appear from early Islamic history, [like] Yazid ibn Mu'awiya himself. He's a supernatural figure [in Yazidi mythology]. Basically, he's the incarnation of Sultan Ezi. These different threads are woven together. You cannot say, "This is history" and "This is myth," and you cannot say which part of history [the myth belongs to].

[Yazidi history] becomes more devoid of mythology and factual [around the time of] the big attacks on the Yazidis by Hafiz Pasha, a Kurdish leader, [from 1837 to 1838].[10] It's possible, for example, that Yazidis in Turkey have different memories [about this attack] because they have a different history. I am not familiar with that. I can also tell you that Yazidis from Sinjar[11] recall an attack by Hafiz Pasha. Then, the nearer you come to the present day, the more concrete historical memories you get. I think Christine Allison wrote an article about how secular and mythical history is interwoven in Yazidi history.[12]

Seth: How do Yazidi narratives of their own history compare to scholarly or non-Yazidi accounts? How are they similar to or different from each other?

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[9] During the 1830s and 1840s, Kurdish lords Bedir Khan Beg and Muhammad Pasha of Rawanduz massacred Yazidi populations in what is now northern Iraq. The violence of these attacks cemented both men's names into Yazidi oral history as some of the worst persecutors of the Yazidi people.

[10] Hafiz Pasha was the Ottoman governor of the *Eyalet* [province] of Diyarbekir during the early-to-mid 19th century. He launched a series of military campaigns from 1837 to 1838 that annihilated Yazidi communities.

[11] "Sinjar" refers to the Sinjar District of northern Iraq, which, along with the nearby Sheikhan District, constitutes the historical homeland of the Yazidi people. "Sinjar" also refers to the town of Sinjar, which serves as the district's capital and was largely destroyed during the 2014 genocide.

[12] Christine Robins (née Allison) is the Ibrahim Ahmed Professor of Kurdish Studies at the University of Exeter. She is an expert on Yazidi history, culture, and religion, as well as on Kurdish populations and religious minorities in the Middle East.

Professor Spät: First of all, [earlier] scholarly works are certainly often problematic because nobody actually did anthropological fieldwork. It didn't even exist in the 19th century when [Westerners] started writing about Yazidis. Travelers and missionaries passed by, [getting their] impressions about [Yazidis from] other groups of people. They would [ask] Muslims and Christians [about Yazidis] and they just jumbled everything together. You can get a general picture about the Yazidis from them, but not really a deeper understanding of the Yazidi religion. There's a whole lot of misleading information [in these early Western accounts]. For example, they just accepted the accusation that Yazidis are devil worshippers.[13] [So,] many of [these works] were not correct. [Some] Yazidis like a few of them, [but] this depends on the content.

I think that [this inaccurate approach to Yazidi ethnography] changed [with] Kreyenbroek. He didn't do fieldwork in the anthropological sense, but he wrote a lot with Yazidis themselves. In his case, that can be problematic, as different Yazidi regions have different traditions. They use different expressions and so on. Therefore, if you rely on a handful [of Yazidi informants] or a few rigid experts, [your observations can be inaccurate]. I found minor things in his observations [to be inaccurate]**.** His overall understanding of Yazidis [wasn't inaccurate], but some [cultural] things are different in their lives.

People tend to repeat this information. I have to say, I did that in my first book. There is a lot of stuff that I would write differently now. I have done more fieldwork [since then], created closer connections with Yazidis, and learned many new things. I don't know how Yazidis think about these kinds of [scholarly] mistakes. For example, everybody writes about the [Yazidi] New Year, the time when women visit the graves and take food. In reality, it's not only the New Year when this happens but also on other occasions. [There are] lots of these small mistakes and shortcomings.

[Scholarship] can become more tricky when you analyze things [about the older aspects of the Yazidi religion]. I know that [some] educated Yazidis really like what Kreyenbroek wrote about Yazidism containing older, Western Iranian motifs because that makes the region older. I think this belief gave a lot of impetus to the idea that Yazidism is a survival of Mithraism, and I'm not talking about the Roman mystery religion. There is this idea, which I think comes from Iran, that pre-Zoroastrian Western Iranian religion was [centered on] the worship of Mithra.[14]

It is true that Mithra was an important figure. We know this from different sources, but this is the extent to which we know that [pre-Zoroastrian Western Iranians] managed to build a [religious] system on this [idea], and the Yazidis have also adopted it. There is proof of this idea in Kreyenbroek's work. It is quite popular [among some Yazidis].

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[13] Since the Middle Ages, Muslim groups and rulers have have falsely accused the Yazidis of "devil worship." This has led to them enduring centuries of persecution, including the Islamic State's genocide in 2014.

[14] Mithra is the god of the sun, light, justice, and war in Indo-Iranian mythology. Belief in Mithra was widespread in pre-Zoroastrian Iran and the Roman Empire.

There is also an idea that Yazidis are the direct descendants of the ancient Sumerians. This concept is very widespread. I think it came with Iraqi nationalism. Iraq bases its [national identity] on the idea that it was the site of the birth of civilization in Mesopotamia. For Iraqi nationalism, I think that concept is very important. That might have been one of the reasons why the Islamic State was so keen on destroying ancient artifacts because, in the ideology of fundamentalist Sunni Islam, there is only one nation, the Islamic *ummah*.[15] [The Islamic State] really rejects this kind of ethnic nationalism.

Anyway, I think it became so much a part of the [Yazidi] people's consciousness, all this talk about Sumeria and its ancient glory, that even the older, illiterate generation [of Yazidis] adheres to it. [I spoke with a man named] Ufakir Hajji who died a few years ago. He recited stories about the Yazidis and talked about the myth of Adam and Eve in the traditional way. He really started everything from the very beginning. Then, he quoted *qewls*,[16] and he mixed that with prose. In the prose section, he actually told me, "We Yazidis, we were the Sumerians. We were the Babylonians." I was talking to somebody who was in his early or late 70s at the time.

Anyway, he was illiterate. He didn't go to school. He went, I think for a few months, and then the school closed. He really learned everything in the traditional way, from listening to his father and other [communal] experts. Even he included in his explanation of Yazidi history, without any reflections, that they were Sumerians, they were Babylonians, they were Mitannians. All these ancient peoples were just [re-discovered] in the 19th century, and we know that Sumerians and Mitannians are not even mentioned in the Bible.

[These ancient ethnic identities] became part of his understanding of Yazidi history. They are quite deeply woven into Yazidi oral history now, and [Yazidis] are bringing in new motifs and discoveries.

Seth: How long have Yazidis been persecuted because of their religion? What rationales have their persecutors historically used to justify their oppression?

Professor Spät: Persecution, for many minorities, is very much at the center of everyday consciousness and identity. This feeling of constant persecution was already there before the Islamic State. It's very interesting, because the Armenian Genocide also impacted Yazidis, Assyrian Christians, and Jacobite Christians, even if to a lesser extent. They fled in 1915 from Turkey. For [Yazidis] living in Iraq before the Islamic State's genocide in 2014, they experienced attacks in the 1880s or 1890s, more than a century earlier. Yet, these attacks are still very, very vivid in Yazidi consciousness and memory.

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[15] In Islamic thought, the term *ummah* refers to the global Muslim community. Membership in the *ummah* applies to all those who believe in Islam and is not limited by racial, ethnic, gender, or geographic boundaries.
[16] *Qewls* are sacred Yazidi hymns that are memorized and performed by *qewels*, a caste of musicians and singers who orally transmit songs, hymns, and histories from father to son.

Of course, there were also smaller [incidents], not persecutions, but discrimination or tensions, [with] Muslims looking down on Yazidis. They could see that, hear that, and feel that. Muslim-Yazidi relationships are very complex. It's not black-and-white. It actually depends on tribes and tribal relations.

Many Yazidis like to talk about how all Muslims persecuted them, but there was this time when I was doing research [in Iraq] about sacred Yazidi spaces and places. Old ladies mentioned to me that in their old village, which was submerged under Mosul Lake, they had these special shrines. They told me how the village was attacked by Arabs in the 1950s or 1960s. It was not a political [statement], the Arabs knew that they could do it without consequences. It was more like a brigand-style attack. They talked about how they were saved when one of these special shrines in the middle of the village started shaking like an earthquake, and then the Arabs ran away.

I noted this down, and then a few years later, I was invited to a Yazidi ritual that took place the week after a wedding. We went to a big house, which had a very nice green garden around it. That's where this took place. It was not in a Yazidi village, it was outside of it. I asked, "Whose place is this?" It turned out that this was a villa and the beautiful garden of an *Agha*, a tribal leader from the Doski tribe. The Doski are local to the Dohuk region of northern Iraq.

I actually knew about this. I had read that [the Doski tribe] used to have a good relationship with Yazidis, but nobody mentioned this to me before the ritual. People said, "Oh, this is the place of the Muslim Doski *Agha*. You can come here and have a wedding. Yes, he's like our brother, he is like family." Afterwards, the same Yazidis told me stories about how they were persecuted, but they also told me, "Oh, yes, he [the *Agha*] is always protecting us."

From this place, I went on to meet an old lady. She was singing some old songs to me, and I mentioned [the *Agha*] to her. She said, "Yes, of course, this is the same *Agha*. When the Arabs attacked us that year, it was the same year that [the *Agha*] came with his people and tribesmen, and he protected us." I was there for the 15th year of my research, and nobody had told me about this before.

This event was similar to what happened to other minorities [in Iraq], specifically Christians. Persecution got bad in the 19th century [in the Ottoman Empire]. It was part of this power struggle between Constantinople and the periphery. Until then, Kurdish princes were pretty much autonomous. They paid lip service to Constantinople. It was only in the 19th century that Constantinople decided to centralize the empire based on the European model, and they got rid of these local princes and principalities. They were not able to rule this land [northern Iraq], so they lost control and new powers arose. There was a power struggle and minorities got caught up in it for a number of different reasons.

Before that, if you really look at the sources of attacks on Yazidis, when Sheikh Adi's successors were attacked, they were not yet Yazidis. They were members of a Sufi order. They were not

considered a different region [from Islam]. If you look at the *Sharafnama*, which is a 16th-century account of Kurdish history, no "devil worship" is mentioned [as a Yazidi custom]. Nothing of the sort. The *Sharafnama* says that they have different customs and ideas [from Islam] and venerate Sheikh Adi. If you look at what happened earlier during the attacks on Yazidis under Badr al-Din Lu'lu',[17] this violence was grounded in politics. Sufi leaders had become too powerful, too influential.

We don't have, as far as I know, any documents detailing from the Muslim side why Badr al-Din Lu'lu' attacked, so we cannot know for sure. My impression is that this was more about power, who was ruling what, who was dominant, and who was subjugated. Heresy or extreme beliefs or practices may have been used as an excuse. It's possible, but [I think] the real reason was certainly not that.

Then, there was Evliya Celebi, [a 17th-century Ottoman explorer] who traveled all over [northern Iraq] and visited some Yazidis. I think he was part of a punitive expedition against Yazidis in the Sinjar region, but I wouldn't swear on which [expedition]. He was very clear [in his writing about his travels] that the reason there was a punitive expedition had nothing to do with religion. It was because the Yazidis didn't pay taxes to the Ottoman government.

You really start getting big, organized attacks against the Yazidis during the 19th century. These were perpetrated by Kurdish lords. Bedir Khan Beg, who is [seen as] a great Kurdish national hero, attacked Assyrians, Christians, Nestorians, and Yazidis [during the 1830s and 1840s]. Additionally, [Muhammad Pasha] of Rawanduz, who was also [seen as] a Kurdish hero, massacred Yazidis [in the 1830s]. In that case, [there may have been] a provocation. Yazidis [supposedly] killed a *mullah* [Muslim clergyman] who was a follower of the Pasha. Yazidis disagree about whether they killed him, or if there was a third party that urged them to do it. We cannot go back in time to confirm this.

[The oldest anti-Yazidi massacre with the most historical evidence] was around 1892. It was perpetrated by an Ottoman general, Omer Wahbi Pasha. Yazidis call him Feriq Pasha. He was very vivid in Yazidi memory when I was [conducting research in Iraq] before the Islamic State's genocide. He was the [perpetrator that] everybody was talking about. His attack was religiously motivated. He wanted to convert Yazidis to Sunni Islam, and I think he probably thought that he would become a big figure. Actually, he lost the battle in Sinjar and there were so many complaints against him by European powers that he got into big trouble in Constantinople because his attack was not authorized by central command. He did these expeditions on his own. So, it was a religiously motivated attack, but not a centrally ordered one.

We ultimately don't know all of the reasons why Omar Wahbi carried out this attack. As far as I know, he didn't leave a detailed account of why he felt this attack was important. He might have

[17] Badr al-Din Lu'lu' was the ruler of the city of Mosul in northern Iraq from 1234 to 1259 CE.

thought that this was a good career move and he miscalculated. Religious excuses have always been there, but I don't think that Yazidis were the primary targets of religious attacks until the 19th century. Even then, it was a more nuanced issue. [Many] Yazidis would hate to hear this, but usually, when there is an attack, it's complex. There's never just one reason. With the Islamic State, I think that's pretty much what happened.

I have heard [some] old Yazidi women from Sinjar agree with this perspective. They said that the Islamic State "is not Islam." They said that the Islamic State uses religion as a *bahane*, as an excuse to attack Yazidis, to take things. This is what I think. The Islamic State wanted to create its own empire. In order to do that, you have to attract people. You attract people by promising material goods, money, cars, houses, or women. To get these resources, you have to take them. You have to steal them from somebody.

For example, in Europe, the Jews have always been attacked for centuries. [If you're a European Christian], it makes sense to attack the Jews if you need a scapegoat or money. Perhaps you don't care about them personally, but there is a historical precedent for this. People are acculturated to the idea that [the Jews] are always attacked, so it's normal to attack [and steal from] them. I think this is what happened with the Yazidis [during the 2014 genocide]. They were a very convenient target for the Islamic State, which wanted to redistribute [resources] to its own people. In order to do that, it had to take those resources away from somebody. This didn't only happen to the Yazidis. Nobody talks about this, but the same thing happened to Shia Turkmen before it happened to Yazidis.

It's very interesting that there was absolutely no international echo of what happened to Shia Turkmen in and around Tal Afar.[18] The only reason I know about this is because Yazidis from Sinjar told me. They told me, "Now the Shia love us. We can even sell alcohol in Baghdad during Ramadan." Normally, you have to close down alcohol shops [during Ramadan]. Only Christians and Yazidis are allowed to sell alcohol, and anybody can buy, but Muslims cannot sell. In the past, [Christians and Yazidis] had to close down during Ramadan. Right after the Islamic State attack when I was there in 2015, [Yazidis] told me, "Now the Shia really love us because we protected the Shia Turkmen who were fleeing the Islamic State."

Shia Turkmen told me the same thing. They were attacked and massacred. They fled toward Sinjar and Yazidis helped them because they knew what happened to them. There was actually talk before the Islamic State attacked about whether they should flee or not. Unfortunately, they didn't.

Getting back to your question, you can read *Dabiq*. *Dabiq* was the Islamic State's [English] periodical in which the jihadist group gave quite a detailed explanation of the Yazidis and their religion. They used older [Islamic] sources and theological writings on Yazidis, giving reasons

[18] Tal Afar is a city in northwestern Iraq. It is predominantly inhabited by Iraqi Turkmen, an ethnic group who originated from Turkic peoples who settled in Mesopotamia perhaps as early as the 7th century CE.

for why they attacked them. Honestly, I agree with the people who say that the Islamic State used religion as an excuse [to attack the Yazidis]. [The Islamic State claimed that] Yazidi soldiers were using drugs and drinking. Islamic State fighters also forced people to pray even though they didn't pray themselves. It was kind of a "mafia state" that had the veneer of an Islamic [political] party. As for how deeply that "Islamic" aspect went and if they all believed in it, that's a big question.

Seth: From what you've seen so far, how have Yazidi identity, religion, and culture changed as a result of the 2014 genocide? What key factors have you identified as being the most important things that have changed?

Professor Spät: I would say that tradition is always changing, even in literate societies. Yazidis have already been changing, and what happened in 2014 was like an earthquake of change. Before I went to northern Iraq in 2015, I was afraid of the demise of the Yazidi religious tradition because of the Islamic State's destruction of shrines and large-scale displacement. Several hundred thousand people had to leave Sinjar, and there was also a huge movement toward Europe. That migration actually became much bigger in the spring of 2015.

The other thing that I noticed when I first went back in 2015 after the Islamic State's genocide was that there was a growing interest in the Yazidi religion, a kind of defiance. Every time I returned, this impression was reinforced. I would say that there is a religious renaissance among Yazidis right now. There is this feeling, and they even say so openly, that "If the Islamic State wanted to kill us because of our religion, then we will insist on our religion. We'll protect our religion even more." This is really observable with young people.

Young and middle-aged Yazidis used to think that religion was boring. They used to say things like, "Why do you care? It's boring. It's stupid. It's a lie." There was this Marxist inheritance, this concept of "religion is the opium of the people," because Marxism used to be quite strong in [northern Iraq]. Many people had a Yazidi [cultural] identity, such as no marriage outside [of the Yazidi community], no marriage between the castes, and preferably don't make friends with Muslims, but they didn't care much about religion. Religion [for young and middle-aged Yazidis] was mostly about events: you came, you had nice food, and you had a nice party. Today, a lot of young people have become quite interested in the Yazidi religion and want to learn about it. This will, of course, add to the codification of Yazidi religious traditions. You can find lots of videos on Facebook now about the Yazidi religion. [These videos] tend to set up certain [uniform] models [of religion] instead of the multifaceted traditions that [Yazidis] used to have. It's a change, and Yazidis really care about this.

I have also noticed that there is a big interest, and quite a nationalist interest, in folk clothes among Yazidis. This is similar to what happened in the 19th and early 20th centuries with nationalist movements in Europe: suddenly, the upper classes discovered the folk clothes of the people. In the past, you couldn't see a young [Yazidi] girl in traditional clothes. Now, all the

young girls are wearing traditional clothes during *tawaf* [village festivals at shrines] or when they go to Lalish.[19]

I have to put "traditional" in quotation marks because some of this clothing is a mixture of [styles from] different regions. Some of them are being dreamt up by Yazidi designers. [In the past,] it seemed like all of this folk clothing was never worn in a nationalist way, but now, there's certainly a kind of revival. It will be very interesting to see what will happen in ten years' time because you could have some real surprises. Yazidis have changed so much in the past 20 years. It will be 20 years this August since I first went [to northern Iraq]. It's quite amazing. We cannot predict the future.

Seth: Thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it.

Professor Spät: Of course! Good luck with your work and your future research.

[19] Lalish Temple is located in the Sheikhan District of northern Iraq and is the holiest site in Yazidism. It is believed to contain the tomb of Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir, who is the most important saint in the Yazidi religion.